

**A Comparison of Top-down and Bottom-up Community Development  
Interventions in Rural Mexico:  
Practical and Theoretical Implications for Community Development  
Programs**

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Statement of the Research Problem

This document reports the findings of a field research project conducted in Veracruz, Mexico between October 1998 and March 1999. The goal of the project was to assess and compare the outcomes of two competing approaches to community development. The project is summarized by briefly discussing the research questions posed, their philosophical underpinning, the methodology used to answer them, and the findings.

Research Questions

The existence of two practice models, top-down and bottom-up, used by community development programs working in Central America gave rise to the field research project that was the basis of this dissertation. For six months, data were collected in rural villages situated in Veracruz, Mexico. These data were then used to answer the following research questions: 1) Does the use of strategies prescribed by the bottom-up model of social development theory accomplish the implied and stated goals of community development better than the strategies prescribed by the top-down model? 2) Are community residents more satisfied with the services provided by the program using the top-down model or the program using the bottom-up model? 3) Is there a relationship between the accomplishment of community development goals, satisfaction with program services, the program models, and the demographic variables of gender, economic standing, and age? Within the questions there are several important concepts. These concepts include the top-down model, the bottom-up model of social development theory, and the implied and stated goals of community development.

Terminology

Community development is a practice pursuit aimed at creating community-oriented perceptions and behaviors among individuals (Garza, Isonio, & Gallegos, 1988; Navarro, 1994). The creation of these perceptions and behaviors in individuals

is presumed to increase the standard of living for the majority of the population (United Nations Development Programme, 1998). The types of perceptions and behaviors purported to increase the standard of living for the majority of the population were first identified by Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century philosophers. For example, Immanuel Kant wrote about the need for people to relinquish some individual freedoms for the betterment of all society (Iatridis, 1994). Adam Smith (1993 [1776]) discussed the importance of balancing self-interest with social sympathy, and Auguste Comte identified the movement of people's behavior from "selfish to unselfish toil" as central to process of development (Jones, 1998). The goal of modern community development is to create these types of community-oriented behaviors and perceptions in individuals. The processes used by practitioners to generate these perceptions and behaviors typically varies between two practice models, top down and bottom-up (Lecomte, 1986; Macdonald, 1995; David, 1993).

#### Top-down model

The top-down model has a significant philosophical and practice history, predating the bottom-up model. The top-down model is structured around the use of professional leadership provided by external resources that plan, implement, and evaluate development programs (Macdonald, 1995). Community development programs using this model typically focus on providing professional leadership to the development process coupled with supportive concrete services. Through the process of residents following the external leadership and accessing the services offered by the program, changes within community residents' perceptions, behaviors and ultimately their standard of living are believed to occur.

#### Bottom-up model of social development theory

Social development theory is considered the conceptual scheme underpinning the bottom-up model (Rubin & Babbie, 1993; Midgley, 1993; David, 1993; Billups, 1990). For the purpose of this research, a set of seven strategies outlined by the US economist Blanchard (1988) were used to operationalize the bottom-up model of social development theory. These strategies included: comprehensive community participation, motivating local communities, expanding learning opportunities, improving local resource management, replicating human development, increasing communication and interchange, and localizing financial access. For practitioners using the bottom-up model as structured by social development theory, participation in community wide discussions, improved opportunities to learn, and the sense of empowerment that comes with knowledge are the necessary precursors to accomplishing the stated and implied goals of community development.

## Stated and implied goals

Both models, when used to structure community development programs, share a common set of stated and implied goals. These goals are: 1) to effect changes in community residents' perceptions about how to improve their standard of living; 2) to create community-oriented behaviors that are based upon the changes in community residents' perceptions; and 3) to improve the standard of living among a majority of community residents (Ewalt, 1997; Garza, et. al., 1988; Navarro, 1994). To accomplish these goals, programs using either the top-down or the bottom-up model require residents to acknowledge the existence of problems and to show a willingness to participate in the community development program's process (Macdonald, 1995; Lecomte, 1986). For programs using the bottom-up model, this process features creating partnerships between community residents and professionals who provide technical support rather than leadership. For programs using the top-down model, this process is about community residents allowing professionals to provide leadership and services that support an externally created development plan.

## Origins of the Research Questions

The three research questions posed arise from the development literature, through which an ongoing debate concerning how to create successful community development programs has occurred. Development/state development for the purpose of this paper is a hegemony that predates and encompasses the distinctive modern practices of economic, political, social, and community development (Moore 1995). The research questions also come from the practical issues related to how valuable and scarce resources are distributed in an attempt to achieve development goals.

## Philosophical History

The beginnings of development discourse can be found in the late Eighteenth and Nineteenth century when philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Thomas Malthus, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and Karl Marx struggled with how the process of state development could be perpetually progressive (Cowen & Shenton, 1996). These early philosophers of state development believed that development, as a process, occurred on two levels. The first level involved the creation of economic, political and social, structures that allowed for the majority of individuals to lead an existence with basic needs met. The second and complementary level was a transformation in the behaviors and perceptions of individual citizens that supported the structural changes in society. These changes in individual citizens featured the

creation of community-oriented perceptions and behaviors that required people to relinquish some individual rights in exchange for an improved society (Cowen & Shenton, 1996; Iatridis, 1994; Huntington, 1994).

For most of these early philosophers (Karl Marx being the notable exception) changes in societal structures and individuals occurred through the exercise of trusteeship. "Trusteeship is the intent which is expressed, by one source of agency to develop the capacities of another." (Cowen & Shenton, 1996, p. X) The basis for the top-down model is found in the concept of trusteeship. Both the concept and the model emphasize the necessity for a group of knowledgeable individuals to direct the process of development. For example, Auguste Comte (Jones, 1998), and Adam Smith (1993[1776]) identified bankers as the one group having the skills necessary to direct the development process. Later during the practice period of development (1920 to present), the top-down model expanded this group to include a wide range of people who were highly educated in a variety of professional backgrounds (Moore, 1995).

Karl Marx, in his 1840s writings attacked the concept of trusteeship. He believed that "trusteeship only reproduced the way in which the possibility of true development had been alienated by making the intent to develop reside in an authority which was external and prior to the process of development itself." (Cowen & Shenton, 1996, p. xi) Marx argued that without trusteeship the natural cycle of state development was directed by changes in individuals' perceptions and behaviors. These changes involved the adopting of community-oriented behaviors. Central to this process was the development of people acting freely yet remaining subordinate to societal responsibilities (Cowen & Shenton, 1996). Marx's theory concerning how individuals and society developed together was the basis for the bottom-up model articulated during the 1960s and 1970s. Both Marx's process and the bottom-up model rely on individuals to possess internal motivations for community-oriented development in the absence of trusteeship or external oversight.

### Practice History

The history of development practice shows how the debates among Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century philosophers became a practical pursuit during the Twentieth Century. The Marshall Plan, the Monroe Doctrine, and the Stalin styled export of Soviet industrialism and communism all represented significant policies which put into effect interventions with nations perceived as being underdeveloped (Moore, 1995). These policies and their funding spawned a plethora of development programs ranging from small-scale community development work to large-scale economic and political interventions (Moore, 1995).

The top-down model dominated the way development programs were structured during the early practice period of development history (Moore, 1995; Lecomte, 1986). The model was applied to both community development programs, which embodied the human side of development, and large-scale structural development interventions. Social upheaval during the 1960s and 1970s stirred renewed interest in Marx's work and led to the articulation of the bottom-up model (Moore, 1995; Iatridis, 1994). The methodology offered by the bottom-up model focused on how people within communities could direct their own development process (David, 1993; Midgley, 1993). The present research project was undertaken in an attempt to understand the factors contained in both the top-down and bottom-up models that contribute to creating successful community development programs.

### Methodology

The two community development programs studied, Universidad Veracruzana Proyecto UNIR (UNIR) and Brigadas Universitarias en Servicio Social (Brigadas), operated under similar conditions in rural villages situated in the state of Veracruz, Mexico. The residents of these villages were surveyed over the course of six months between late 1998 and early 1999. The data gathered were used to answer three research questions: 1) Does the use of strategies prescribed by bottom-up model and social development theory accomplish the implied and stated goals of community development better than the strategies prescribed by the top-down model? 2) Are community residents more satisfied with the services provided by the program using the top-down model or the program using the bottom-up model? 3) Is there a relationship between the accomplishment of community development goals, satisfaction with program services, the program models, and the demographic variables of gender, economic standing, and age? The one significant difference between the two programs was that UNIR used the bottom-up model of social development theory to direct its interventions. The other program, the Brigadas, used the top-down model, which prescribed strategies that were significantly different.

A hired field assistant and the researcher collected data directly from a sample of 701 community residents (UNIR  $N = 344$ , Brigadas  $N = 357$ ) living in 21 different rural villages in Veracruz, Mexico (UNIR  $N = 9$  villages, Brigadas  $N = 12$  villages). The primary independent variable of interest was program model. Additionally, the demographic variables of gender, age, and economic status were analyzed in order to assess their possible relationship with the two dependent variables.

The dependent variables were the scores from a standardized satisfaction scale and 24 summated statements from an instrument created to measure the implied and stated goals of community development. The instrument, named the Goals of



Community Development Scale (GCDS), was confirmed reliable using a Cronbach's alpha and a Guttman's reliability analysis. The scale was also seen to have strong face validity among the UNIR and Brigadas directors and staff, confirming that the identified impacts were indeed the ones sought by both programs.

An analysis of the sample drawn found that the descriptive demographic variables of the people living in villages served by UNIR were not statistically different from those living in villages served by the Brigadas. This allowed for the assumption that the study sites were generally equivalent, differing only with regard to the approach to community development used in them.

### Results

The data collected revealed that there were statistically significant differences in the way that community resident perceived the two community development programs. The program structured by the bottom-up model of social development theory (UNIR) received higher scores on the satisfaction scale and the GCDS. The findings indicated that as a method of intervention, the bottom-up model was better at accomplishing the goals of community development in these sites. This is consistent with the wide range of recent literature that supports the use of the bottom-up model of social development theory as a preferable structure for community development programs.

However, a closer examination of the data revealed two other important findings. First, an analysis of the data showed that the differences between the two programs, although statistically significant, were not dramatic. Both programs posted satisfactory scores on all instruments used to collect data, leading the researcher to examine what strengths the programs shared. Observed variations among communities suggested that there were other variables beyond simply the program model that influenced the success of the programs.

These observations were confirmed in a statistical analysis of the individual communities included in the research project. The common strengths shared by the communities in which the programs were successful included: 1) The existence of strong and positive relationships between community residents and program staff; 2) the provision of tangible services that were congruent with local community needs; and 3) the ability of community residents to balance the need for external resources with internally created goals.

Second, an examination of the frequency distributions for the individual statement from the GCDS showed that a large portion of the UNIR program's success was related to its provision of services that were perceived as helping the

local economy. There were some differences between the two programs in promoting goals associated with social development theory (i.e. comprehensive community participation, motivating local communities, expanding learning opportunities, and improving local resource management). As was expected, the UNIR program scored better on those statements pertaining to social development theory. However, the differences between the two programs on these statements were not as large as the differences between the two programs on the economic statements of the GCDS.

The influence of demographic variables was less dramatic in this study than has been stated by other development researchers. This was particularly true of gender, which had been widely presented in the development literature as a significant demographic influence (Crummett, 1996; Elson, 1996). The findings showed that gender had little to no effect on these residents' perceptions of programs' outcomes. Similarly, age differences also did not influence residents' perceptions of the programs' outcomes. However, the demographic variable economic standing did have a significant impact on residents' perceptions. Those individuals with less personal resources viewed both program models in a poorer light than those individuals with more personal resources. This finding confirmed that economic issues probably have a significant influence on the outcomes of community development programs.

#### Utility for Social Work Practice

Since the 1960s there has been an increased awareness among development researchers and practitioners that demographic differences within populations should be taken into consideration when designing development programs (David, 1993; Crummett, 1996; Davis, 1994). Cultural norms pertaining to gender, age, and economic status vary around the world and therefore may have differing influences on the outcomes of development programs. As a result of this observation, development researchers and practitioners have begun to speculate how these demographic differences effect community development programs. In keeping with this interest, the influence of gender, age and economic status were examined as part of this research project.

Since the early 1980s, client satisfaction with services has become an important part of the social service landscape (Gambrill, 1997). The satisfaction of targeted recipients of services is one of the central goals of public and private non-profit social service agencies in the new era of helping (Axinn & Levin, 1992).

For a good reason, satisfaction with services, even if community residents do not purchase the services, is an important part of insuring programs' success at influencing people's perspectives and behaviors (Gambrill, 1997). If people are not satisfied with the services that programs provide they are not likely to participate in or work with the programmatic efforts. Therefore, the measurement of community residents' satisfaction with the services provided by the two community development programs included in this research project was performed to improve our understanding of the programs' overall functioning.



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